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ABSTRACT

This guide is intended for individuals and groups who are interested in developing resource material for highly participatory, small, democratic adult discussion groups that are based soundly on adult learning principles. Suggestions are provided for preparing learning circle material that will be balanced, authoritative, and help people in thoughtful discussion, and that will do the following: be learner friendly by using and valuing existing knowledge and experience and by providing a forum where people feel okay about what they don't know; take a holistic approach, where problems and issues are placed in a broad social, economic, and political context; and have action outcomes that are not prescribed, but groups may consider and decide upon various possibilities. Planning the learning circle is best done through developing a communication plan that defines the issues, target audience, objectives, and key questions and that identifies resources needed for the project and considers methods of evaluation. Some principles for preparing materials are as follows: (1) consider guidelines for a productive discussion; (2) provide factual background information; (3) provide opportunities for people to localize the material; (4) remember that learning circles should lead to change and/or action; (5) organize the material; and (6) evaluate the materials by testing them with a group. The document contains contact information. (MO)

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DO · IT · LEARNING CIRCLES YOURSELF

A guide to preparing your own learning circle material

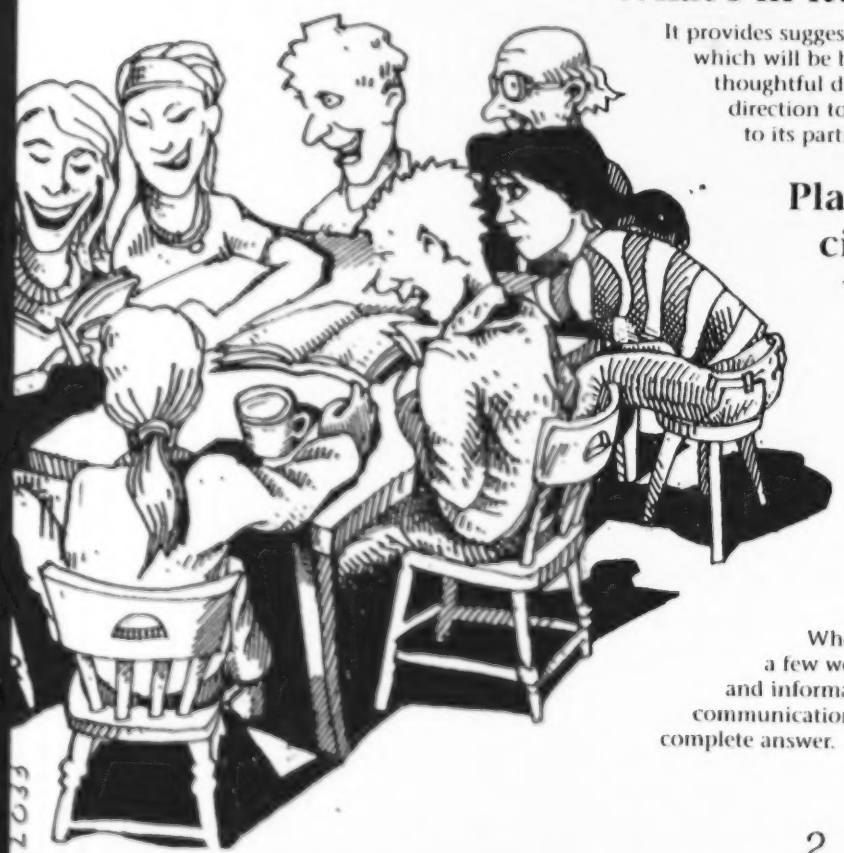
Who is this guide for?

This guide is intended for individuals and groups who are interested in developing resource material for discussion groups based on the process of a learning circle. These are highly participatory, small-group, democratic discussions, based soundly on adult learning principles. They:

- are learner friendly, in using and valuing existing knowledge and experience, and providing a forum where people feel okay about what they don't know.
- take an holistic approach, where problems or issues are placed in a broad social, economic and political context.
- are intended to have action outcomes, which are not prescribed—but a group may consider and decide upon various possibilities.

What's in it?

It provides suggestions for preparing learning circle material which will be balanced, authoritative and help people in thoughtful discussion. This will give structure and direction to the learning circle process and confidence to its participants.



Planning the learning circle

This is best done through developing a communication plan. This is a clear and simple statement which: defines the issues; target audience; objectives; and key questions.

It also helps to: identify resources needed for the project; and consider evaluating the project.

The communication plan is a valuable part of the project which will help to keep you on track as you develop the material. It will also assist people who review or trial your material.

Whether you spend a few hours, a few days or a few weeks, use the following planning model and information as a guide to writing a communication plan. But remember it is a guide, not the complete answer.

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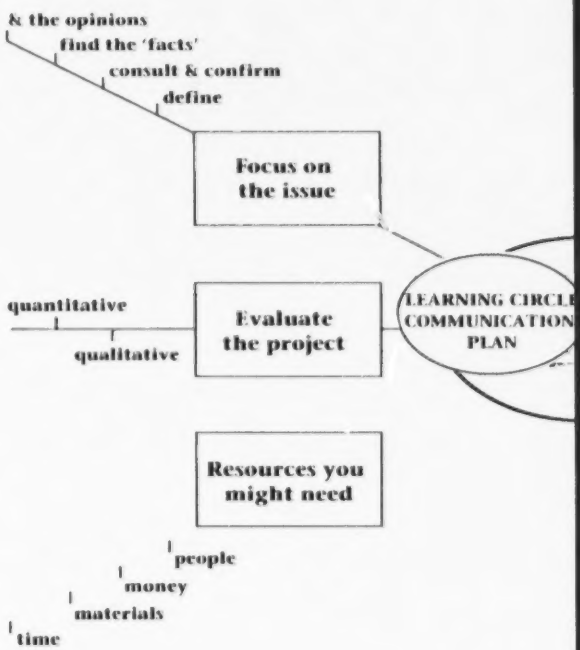
Focus on the issue

- Write a clear and simple statement to define the issue. This will help to clarify the project and may also be useful in promoting the material.
- Look at the big picture ... and all the little bits. Consider causes as well as effects (symptoms) and look at both long-term and short-term impacts.
- What different information sources do you have? Apart from the usual written sources, audio and video programs which may be available from community groups, government departments, schools and colleges, don't forget residents and other local sources such as libraries and historical societies.
- Which other people can you consult? This should confirm that your statement and the information you collect is not missing something important or paying too much attention to something that you (and possibly only you) think is important.
- Get the views of stakeholders*. Learning circles should ensure that opposing and differing views are heard. Can you identify areas of agreement and disagreement.

* Stakeholders are individuals or groups who are interested, concerned or affected by the issue. They may have special knowledge or some responsibility in relation to the issue. Stakeholders may be included in your audience.

Evaluating the project

- Evaluation will be easier when you have completed the communication plan. It can help you modify this project or plan your next project. Be open to learning from your evaluation, as few projects are entirely successful. Planning to evaluate your project will also help if you want funding.
- Decide on your evaluation method(s) before commencing the project. Can you get a response from both participants and facilitators/organisers? Consider individual informal discussions or focus groups with 5–10 people.
- Quantitative information can include numbers of groups, individuals and meetings. How well have you reached your primary and secondary audiences?
- Qualitative information can come from people telling stories about their response to the issue and the meetings. Some of the individual outcomes relate to quality of life, and personal stories can effectively record this.
- Consider questions which evaluate whether the material was:
  - Too much, about right or not enough; Clear and easy to use; Relevant and interesting; Balanced, with a range of views;
  - Able to help people clarify values and understand different views; Draw out peoples experience and knowledge; Encourage on-going enquiry or action.



Resources

- People learn differently. How can you provide different experiences such as: visual material; guest speakers; 'hands-on' activities; a field trip or excursion; interviews with different people?
- How much will your project cost? Identify different stages in your project and cost them separately.
- Do you have the time and necessary skills? Consider doing a skills audit and timeline for the project. This may include research, writing, interviewing. What else?
- How will you promote your project? Are there costs here?
- Who can support you in your community? Consider groups or individuals with similar interests. What benefits are there to sponsors? What sources of in-kind support exist?
- Is there any sponsor you would not take support from? What criteria should you use to decide on accepting support?

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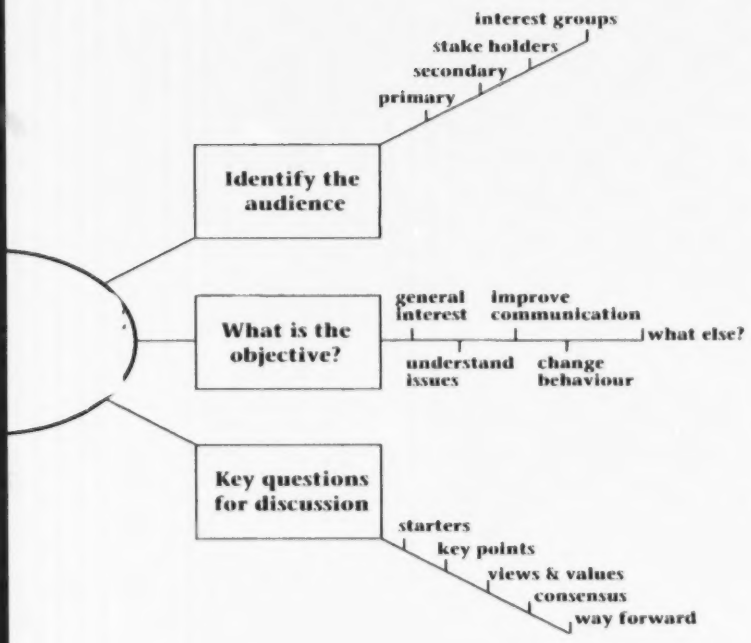
Identify the audience

- Is there more than one audience? How might it help to define primary and secondary audiences?
- How might considering the target audience help in selecting the issues and content?
- What do your audience think about the issue? You might find out more from informal individual discussions, or focus groups with 5–10 people.
- How can you ensure that different cultural, age or educational backgrounds and values are respected? Do you have the skills or do you need assistance to address some of these issues? For example, what are the implications if your target audience includes many people from non-English speaking backgrounds.
- What will attract your audience to the project? What will inhibit them? What can you do to increase the attraction and overcome the inhibition?



What is the objective?

- This is the goal or aim of your project. Try and identify educational objectives such as attitudes, values, knowledge and behaviour.
- Individual outcomes might include:
  - increased self-confidence and valuing own experience
  - improved communication and interpersonal understanding
  - developing problem solving and critical thinking skills
  - addressing personal concerns which are part of a larger issue
- Group outcomes might include:
  - new and expanded networks
  - the value of combined skills and experiences
  - exploring or moving toward some form of social action
- How will these objectives and outcomes address the issue or improve the situation? How can your project influence decision makers or 'experts'?
- What other direct outcomes or results will there be, such as discussion guide(s) or a completed project?

Key questions for discussion

- The key to discussion questions is that they be clear, penetrating and bold. While it will not be helpful to threaten people with your questions, they should challenge people.
- Questions should be open-ended (what, how, why) rather than encouraging yes/no answers. They should help facilitate the discussion by:
  - providing a starting point
  - drawing out participants experiences, opinions and ideas
  - identifying the heart of the issue, the key points
  - generate discussion of a wide range of views
  - highlight values that underlie different opinions
  - help to identify areas of agreement
  - show a way forward, either to more information or some sort of change.
- Consider the ORID framework. These are sequential questions which are:
  - Objective—based on the facts
  - Reflective—identify emotions and feelings
  - Interpretive—clarify values, meaning, importance and implications
  - Decisional—about the future

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Preparing the materials—some principles

When preparing your learning circle material keep the following principles in mind.

1 Consider guidelines for a productive discussion

Most groups will benefit from some suggested ground rules and possible group goals. This can help ensure everyone has the opportunity to participate, the group is not dominated by the confident and articulate, and different views are respected. Remember that not all groups will be interested in all the information presented and making choices is an important part of the group process.

2 Provide factual background information

This is information that most people will accept as being correct. This should be the minimal amount needed to assist informed discussion and decision making. Don't overload people with information that is not necessary, but provide sources of more detailed information for people who would like it, eg. in an appendix or as references that are easily accessible to the average person. Consider a glossary of technical information and key words.

3 Provide opportunities for people to localise the material

This can be done by: using local media coverage on the issue; finding local resource material prepared by government, community or industry bodies; inviting local guest speakers; taking a field trip or visit to meet with people or see the issue at first hand. Localising the material will help to update it when time and events move on. It will also lead to the group taking more responsibility for their learning.

4 Learning circles should lead to change and/or action

Rather that prescribing an action, present the opportunity for groups and individuals to consider the change or action that suits them. This can include taking responsibility for localising the material as well as on-going actions following the learning circle.

5 Organise the material

Make sure that the material is reader friendly and written in plain English—not everyone has good reading skills. It is worth considering including some visual material if available. Consider a natural evolution of the material. You might look at the issue first as it effects individuals, then consider community, national and international effects. Move from personal experiences, to defining the problem, to examining alternative solutions, to deciding what kinds of action to take. Wherever possible make your learning circles materials a living document which can be added to or updated as needed.

6 Trial it

The best way to find out if your learning circle material promotes discussion is to try it with a group. Find a group of people who have not been active in developing the material but have an interest in discussing the issue. Or you might know of a group who are experienced in learning circles and will enjoy helping you make your materials work. Listen to the group as they discuss the material. You will learn what works, what doesn't, and what needs clarification.

This guide has been produced by Meg Bishop and Graeme Gibson. Just as learning circle material should be a living resource, so this is a living guide. To share your experiences, or for more information about 'Do-it-yourself', including workshops, contact Real Options, 67 Bonython Street, Downer, ACT 2602. Ph & fax: 02 6257 7438 E-mail: gandmee@dynamite.com.au

Or you can get more information from Learning Circles Australia a program of Adult Learning Australia Inc. from their homepage: www.ala.asn.au. Or contact Mary Hannan, Learning Circles Australia, PO Box 308, Jamison Centre, ACT 2614. Ph: 02 6251 7933 Fax: 02 6251 7935

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